

As you read this, you feel yourself getting sleepy...you will follow my every word: Paramount owns Star Trek, A. Decker created Star Traks, I spun off BorgSpace. You now have the urge to send me \$50.

Borg Scratch Fever

At the scale of the very small, fine hairs are insurmountable obstacles, biological cells are enormously large industrial centers, and even the dipole moment of a water molecule becomes a force of opposition. Of all the sciences the Borg are proficient in, nanoengineering is the most highly refined. When machines are the size of cells and smaller, conventual engineering breaks down; "smart" ceramometallics and specially "bred" crystals create a chassis and simple brain to act in concert with artificial instinct. Like the Borg, a single nanoprobe alone is meaningless; but power comes in numbers...and together anything is possible.

Army ants on the march through the jungle - don't get in the way.

Individually, nanites are vulnerable to a variety of dangers: radiation, wear and tear, the squeezing grasp of the folds of a protein. The machine may be sundered, but the parts will be scavenged by others and fed to the cells of the host which have been recruited to build more nanites. Production easily keep pace with daily destruction.

And what of those biological-based industrial complexes? Usually manufacturing products from peptides to enzymes, the artificial chromosome introduced at assimilation to selected targets is the blueprint for the nanomachines, directing the building in a rhythm as old as the universe's eldest cell. For the Borg are also the masters of genetics, or at least highly focused on a certain aspect of the science, creating several master strands of DNA (or its analogue) which are as self-repairing as the original template, and as highly malicious as a virus. A virus, though, is a primitive prototype of cellular hijacking when compared to the masterpiece of Borg ingenuity.

And what happens if the biological base of programmed-instinct nanoprobe becomes dysfunctional? Do not ask, for the answer is irrelevant. It cannot happen. The Borg are perfect in every way.

Resonating for the briefest of moments at an exceedingly rare combination of subspace frequencies, a bond breaks, an atom shifts, a structure subtly alters, an event cascades. Never say never; there is no such thing as impossible.

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##Two time cycles prior to the present:##

{Andthenandthenthingspongebecomesthecenterofrealityasitscrystalsofpureenjoymentsoakin tothebrain....}

2 of 20 was in the midst of a "manic moment," and the end did not appear to be in immediate sight. The rapidly spoken words, no pause evident in what was essentially a stream of consciousness given verbal form, echoed through the dataspace. The current topic, one often focused upon, was a clade of hallucinogenic sponge with the common name "G'floo!". Manic moments were normally short in duration...but not this time.

When the drone in question had been assimilated many decades prior, there had been enough narcotics in his system to give the entire Collective flashbacks several months. His brain

structure had been permanently altered due to imbibing pretty much everything; and even forced detoxification by nanoprobes could not completely repair everything. Highs were no longer possible, but that did not stop 2 of 20 from relating all his experiences.

{...theG'floo!shouldbepurplewhenripe. Don'ttaketheredonesor...}

It was a widely held belief that 2 of 20 was the only being on board who could understand raw data from Sensors when the latter had tuned the grid to the nonstandard configurations she found most useful. Sensors objected, primarily on the grounds that she herself had trouble understanding 2 of 20.

..{.noworangeG'floo!,ifonecanfindit,isthemostdesirable...}

Captain could not stand it anymore. {SHUT UP!} He was ignored. Grumbling, he checked the status of Doctor, who was currently in a regeneration cycle. Captain rudely awakened the head of the personal maintenance hierarchy.

{I haven't done anything! There's no one on the docket! The tasks of this hierarchy are caught up on!} The protests were automatic as Doctor's consciousness distanced itself from the dataspace, more firmly rooting itself in its native body.

{I don't care,} answered Captain. {I need your help to send 2 of 20 to sleep.}

A relieved answer: {Oh.}

Unfortunately, after several minutes of increasingly complex and forceful command lines to send 2 of 20 into a compelled regenerative cycle, it became apparent the latter was not responding. One string of code not only did not work, it bounced erratically into the propulsion pathways, causing the cube to drop abruptly out of transwarp. Sensors immediately began to complain as the grid backlash affected her hierarchy, followed by Delta as the hours she had spent tuning the main core suddenly became meaningless.

Captain reviewed the internal lattices...all appeared intact. Appeared was the operative word. A schematic of alcove assignments was loaded, and then: {76 of 212, you have the alcove next to 2 of 20.}

76 of 212, of the weapons hierarchy, winced. {Yes. Don't remind me. He not only spouts that junk in the intranets, but mutters it aloud as well. Want to listen about the merits of G'floo! in stereo?}

{No.} The thought was painful enough. How 2 of 20 became assigned to the Group of 20, those that rotated as Assimilation head, was not fully understood. It seemed all of the Group had one or another mental issues. {Look at 2 of 20's alcove. I want to see if he has done anything to it.}

Captain altered his point of view to piggy back on 76 of 212's perceptions. The scene tilted as the latter drone leaned out of his alcove to view his neighbor. Although the lights were of the standard dim condition, it was obvious that 2 of 20 had very much altered the feed from the tertiary distribution node which was located directly above his alcove. Various data filters were hooked in serial fashion, neatly blocking any attempts to end his diatribe.

{76 of 212, remove that hardware.}

A prosthetic arm reached out to catch several cables, sawing through the optics. More insulated wires dangled higher, and as 76 of 212 reached up with both limbs to catch them, 2 of 20 abruptly halted his tuneless rendition of "An Ode to Purple Fluthi Spores".

"Hey!Stopthat!" 2 of 20 disengaged from his alcove, stepping out to defend his work.

"You've told me about G'floo! for the last time," 76 of 212's voice spat back. A great majority of the cube had halted their activities to watch the unfolding drama.

"Stopitthismoment!" A pale hand reached forwards, hesitated, then scratched at 76 of

212's hand in passing as it missed a futile grab at the filters. The damage was mere annoyance which healed as fast as it formed. 76 of 212 yanked the last of the cable from the node, raining it down onto the catwalk with a satisfying clatter.

Captain yessed, swiftly directing Doctor to engage the appropriate command codes. In the vision of 76 of 212, 2 of 20 suddenly went stiff as his eye glazed. The drone turned mechanically, stepped up and back into his alcove, and could finally be felt melding his consciousness at a deep level with the sub-collective.

{Show's over, get back to your duties,} informed Captain within the general intranet. A quick flick of the mind, and Cube #347 surged back into transwarp.

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Viruses come in many clades - organic, computer, free-energy, memic, and mech are the most common. If an organism, by whatever loose definition, exists, some parasite will take advantage of the opportunity presented. And for all their potential virulence, viruses are rather picky beasts.

It is exceedingly rare for a virus to jump species, much less clades. Tinkering with genes (or other inheritance factors) may allow for increased potential of trans-species infection, but again, the basic virus clans are fairly static. Unfortunately, the Borg, because of their "multi-faceted" nature, have to routinely deal with attackers from the families of computer and organic. Needless to say, virus protection is a major expenditure of effort.

Mech-based viruses, despite the seeming attraction, don't affect the Borg. The parasite requires a constantly stimulated environment in which to hide its trinary digital code from its host's hunter-seeker immune programs. As the mech species tend to house each individual personality in a chassis, they are as tied to their bodies as much as any human. They /are/ their chassis, be it courier, bulldozer, or industrial asteroid miner. The Borg, on the other hand, can and will eliminate those bodies (or cubes or planets) that become infected with viruses that cannot be purged. Therefore, any malevolent mech infection, could it exist in what was fundamentally an alien environment, would not survive to reproduce and spread.

For those viruses which are potentially hostile, strong genetic systems and nanites which physically attack an intruder are sufficient deterrents against the biological; and sophisticated software guards pathways from computer-based corruption.

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##Random memes one time cycle prior to the present:##

{Sorry,} said 76 of 212, {I did not mean to damage you.}

211 of 240 looked along the distance of her arm to the drone grasping her wrist, then out at a starfield severely distorted by passage through transwarp. Conversation was within the intranet, vacuum a poor conductor of spoken words. {An epidermal rip is nothing. Nothing. I just want to make contact with the hull. Now.} She was subsequently reeled in and spun about until she made magnetic contact with both feet. The dull "clump" of the active implants in her soles under body armor was welcome.

Repeated 76 of 212, {Sorry.}

{Sorry? You almost push me off into oblivion and all you can say is sorry? However, I

am relieved to have a steady footing.} Pause. {Delta knows the situation, but we are to continue.}

{I know. I can hear the orders too, you know.}

Muttered 211 of 240, {This hierarchy exchange program is not working. I prefer boredom to working with drones not specialized for the task.}

76 of 240 and 211 of 240 continued their assignment of rebuilding a malfunctioning sensor array. The conduit overhead shimmered with flickering blues and greens, tinged with purple streaks.

211 of 240: "Load me up with struts."

As the drone turned her back to present her carry-all harness to 53 of 240, the latter began to heft the two meter duralloy lengths of metal from the stack along one side of Bulk Cargo Hold #2. 53 of 240 fit the first, then the second strut into the harness. 211 of 240 abruptly turned.

"Look what you did!" complained 53 of 240, holding up one of her non-prosthetic limbs. A ragged tear swept from secondary elbow to wrist. "Any deeper, and some of the servo-motor implants might have been damaged; and then I would have needed to schedule with Doctor."

"Maybe I should trim the claws on this hand." A pause to examine rather wicked looking cuticles. "Anyway, I want you to load me with a pair of the one meter lengths as well because 76 of 212 indicates they would be useful."

"Be more careful next time," stated Delta Body B, indicating the already fading trail of nail marks along one arm.

159 of 230 sent an assent as he transported elsewhere in the cube.

Doctor, optic implant on maximum magnification, peered in the deep leg wound. The tear went not only through the armor, but into muscle, severing several high-tensile tendons. They would have to be replaced.

"And how did this happen, exactly?" Doctor turned to dig through a standing cabinet of tools, finally finding the pair of laser scalpels he wanted.

429 of 510, paralyzed neck down on the maintenance table so that accidentally activated implants or assemblies would not move its body out of preferred alignment, began to answer, "You see..."

Doctor watched the series of events replay as he leaned over the damaged leg, deciding which biological and mechanical connections to sever first in order to reach the target tendon insertion points. "You know the rules. No jhad-ball allowed in the slush-tank or scrap holds. You are fortunate the tackle by 177 of 510 did not do further damage. With his elbow spikes and ankle spurs, he should have been assigned to the weapon hierarchy, not sensors."

The drone on the operating table did not comment.

"Now, be a good drone. This may tingle a bit when I remove the nerves. If you are still, I'll see about replacing them with some nice monofilament silicorganics."

"Not like I can do anything else, Doctor. You /have/ immobilized me."

* * * * *

A mech virus hid in the constantly stimulated organic pathways of 2 of 20. Normally a biological brain could not support a mech virus, but long-ago drugs had made such a hash of

neural activity that such an infection could hide...not replicate, but survive.

The virus had found refuge among the nanites of the Borg's body, leaping randomly from miniature machine to miniature machine as they were internally recycled, siphoning power from erratically firing neurons. Despite the quasi-silicorganic host shells and the biologic electrical activity of the metahost which hid its presence, the virus was slowly dying. Bit by bit the original nanites it had infected when seeking shelter from an otherwise lethal environment were replaced, and the new ones inaccessible. Then something changed.

A new flavor of nanoprobe could be tasted, ones slightly different from the original. The new machines were open to infection...were open to serve as hosts for an expansion of the virus' matrix. The nanites were few, it was true, but a long history of "natural selection" had installed many if/then pathways within the digital processes of the rogue bit of mech quasi-personality.

Instinct pushed for survival; the conditions were allowable for reproduction to commence.

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##Current time cycle, twelve hours before present:##

Efficiency was down. Delta was not pleased. The maintenance schedule called for assessment of the ten auxiliary cores. One at a time they were powered to full operating potential, then allowed to assume function of the main core in a simulated loss of the primary propulsion system. It made passage through the conduit bumpy at times, but any damage, such as sheering of the occasional antennae cluster, was inconsequential.

The process was occurring at a pace slower than normal. Nine hours per core was acceptable, with six hours at full energy output, and the remaining three allotted to replacement of assemblies operating in a less than optimal fashion. The fifth auxiliary core evaluation was in progress, with the overall average pegged at twelve hours per test. Oddly, the first two cores had been completed at the expected pace; the others were taking increasingly longer.

It was not acceptable...not acceptable at all. Not even for Cube #347's imperfect status.

Delta experienced an odd flash from her B body, as if she was about to lose contact with herself. There were no similes, no metaphors for the feeling; she /was/ two bodies, /one/ mind...Delta could no more contemplate not being housed in two places at once than a non-Borg individual could actively plan walking about without a head. Part of herself felt normal, the other part was "fuzzy." As diagnostics of Body B were unproductive, she sent that part of herself back to her alcove for regeneration.

Along the way, B body ran into several walls. It was quite embarrassing.

5 of 19 felt pleased for no apparent reason. He just did. The room spun pleasantly before his trinocular vision, bulkheads and displays blurring for scant moments before snapping back into crystal clarity. 56 of 240 tripped nearby, falling in a heap. 5 of 19 began to giggle.

Borg do not giggle.

Thirteen of the eighteen engineering hierarchy who were working on Auxiliary Core #5 broke into hysterical laughter. The remaining five looked at each other, then at the chortling drones. As one they called to drone maintenance to report a serious problem.

Captain intercepted another group of rogue command codes from within his hierarchy.

The cube performed a half spin before the momentum could be halted. While Second viciously tracked down and cut the instigators out of the pathways (emergency stasis code to send the drones into regeneration), Captain rotated the ship to present a flat face to the direction of travel.

The number of unexpected commands to propulsion - not to mention systems under primary control of the other hierarchies - were growing. Two instances of a shift in heading, one change in conduit velocity, and five cube axis adjustments had occurred in the last several hours. Something was wrong; the sub-collective, despite its inefficiencies, did not experience such high levels of unedited impulses being translated into action. Captain created a multi-hierarchy list of mental signatures thus far unaffected, then tasked them to determine what the hell was happening.

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Once established, a virus must spread, of which there are many methods. The most successful biological variants might induce mucus secretions, causing the host to sneeze or cough; or, alternately, the production of metabolic poisons by the host's own cells will alter behavior to facilitate transmission. Other clades perform similar modifications, all in the name of evolution and survival.

The mech virus was no different. The host nanites proved to be very adaptable, much like the subconscious processes of a compromised mech chassis. Reproductions of the virus' matrix were bundled into the nanoprobes normal operating system. While active virus programs circulated in blood and crawled among neurons, dormant copies in their nanite shells were sequestered at the surface of the skin. When the pathways registering the approach of another biological became active, when specific motor neurons began to fire, it was a simple action to initiate a secondary action of flexing the end of the manipulatory appendage, consequently passing on the senescent packages.

Of course, for what is a fairly radical alteration in behavior on the scale of the metahost, there are bound to be complications...side-effects.

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##Now:##

Captain completed the lock-out of transporters, despite the hue and cry. Inappropriate use of the system, most notable the flaming bags of replicated novelty explosives, had prompted the action. The ceiling and one bulkhead of Captain's local nodal intersection was now decorated with a sticky yellow substance, although he himself had managed to avoid the material; his alcove down the tier was another story. Drones would have to walk between locations, or petition a subgroup of twenty in the command and control hierarchy for transporter access.

Next on the agenda: {Report!} This demand was sent to the partition contemplating the increasing degradation of inhibition among the ranks.

Responded 15 of 133, who had figuratively drawn the short straw for spokesdrone, {A correlation had been completed of the underlying similarity of mental processes to archival records. The state is similar to the inebriation experienced by most species after consuming quantities of fermented beverages, certain drugs...}

Captain interrupted, {You mean the affected drones are all drunk.}

{Yes. You could say that,} said 15 of 133, {except that such substances do not affect the Borg.}

The general subconscious of Cube #347 whispered a fluid, and valid, fear. Virus. New virus. Captain swiftly diverted additional resources into a diagnostic of all computational and biological components of the cube.

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One must understand, for all its sophistication, viruses of any clade do not have intelligence, only the appropriate instincts. For some, the instinct is the cascade of enzymes and proteins along a strand of genetic material, responding to exterior stimuli. For others, ones and zeros encode an eerily similar execution despite the vast differences in basic evolution. By such definition, some species even designate Borg nanoprobes as a type of hybrid virus.

Some behaviors appear mysterious in its origination, at least at first glance. An action taken out of context, especially a latent one which seems to otherwise be extraneous to survival, may have a relevant history. The mutations which could respond to a novel stimulus - a new drug, a revised hunter-seeker protocol - survived. Shuffled into storage, the behavior may later be reused, or adapted to a previously unencountered situation.

Instinct can be extraordinarily complex. In fact, some civilizations debate to this day about their own species: how much of their own responses are due to genetics (or other) and how much to an actively knowing and participating consciousness.

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The consensus was clear - the virus was neither organic nor computer, it was mech. And as the only recent contact had been with a GPS courier of mech species #3, it was not too difficult to extrapolate where the infection originated. Still, confusion remained, conviction that such a virus clade was supposed to be unable to affect the Borg difficult to shake. In response, the Greater Consciousness had effectively severed contact with its wayward sub-collective. While the protocol was designed to limit infection if the method of transmission was via virtual interactions, the blocking of informational resources had the consequence of slowing the search for a cure.

The hierarchies of Assimilation and Doctor and Weapons conferred, loading relevant files of nanite engineering and viruses into active memory. It was not enough. Both sensory and engineering were recruited into the expanding search for a cure, the former supplying detailed information on the radiation thus encountered in the nebula, the latter for what effects, if any, such energy might have on Borg hardware. The consolidating outcome was not cheery.

{Thith ith highly in-in-inefficient.} Delta spat out the last thought into the dataspace. Body B had been affected by the virus, and while Delta as a whole could still function, her half-drunken state was quite noticeable.

Captain had dedicated command and control processes to the hunt to find the original carrier, the drone who had harbored the virus in the months since the incident with the GPS mech. Careful appraisal of infected drones in the intranets demonstrated the virus to be spread physically, not as a Trojan horse amongst routinely swapped files. By tracking incidents of breakdown in self-editing of personal impulses, crosslinked with sifting vast quantities of stored memory to determine who had contact with whom over the last three cycles, the answer for one

conundrum was finally forthcoming. 2 of 20 appeared to be Cube #347's version of Typhoid Mary.

Captain ordered 2 of 20, who continued to be outwardly unaffected by the virus, to report to Doctor. It was time to bend all of Cube #347's limited resources to the task of developing a method to halt the virus, hopefully before it escaped the limitation of spread by physical contact, jumping into the dataspace. Viruses, of whatever clade, by their very nature had an uncomfortable ability to mutate.

The complete technical report poured forth, the sub-collective of Cube #347 talking to itself in its singular way. Sensors began:

{Sensors [observes] a unique radiation present in this nebula. It resembles eta radiation, but with a polarized moment in the secondary sub-harmonic frequency. Sensors would have missed it altogether if this [scene] had not [popped up]. The [taste] of this nebula is quite complex, and the specific undertone one of many. Only the sensitive [palette] of Sensors is sufficient for the task.}

Captain snorted, {Enough boasting. It is irrelevant. Delta, enunciate the importance behind the radiation.}

Delta swiftly ordered the information as best as possible, stopping a subpart of herself which had the notion to erase carefully derived theories which had taken much processing time by her hierarchy to compile. {Thith whole nebula ith su...su...covered with the fluctuating sub-harmonics. The polarization is sufficient to twithst and tweak reality. Reality constants randomly change at the distant decibel...er...decimal places before normality resherts ithelf. Upshot is improbable occurrences are a sm...smi...bit more probable within the boundaries of the nebula.}

Captain prompted, {And this means...?} A picture of a humanoid waving a hand in an impatient manner was imaged into the intranet.

Doctor smoothly took up where Delta had left off. {2 of 20, poor little drone, was at the epicenter of one of the probability fluxes. More specifically, the artificial chromosome in an epidermal cell was affected.}

{ThatreallyreallyreallywasannoyinghowyousampledmyDNA! Letmeoffofthistable!} 2 of 20 interjected into the narration.

In Maintenance Bay #5, Doctor looked down at 2 of 20, who was clamped securely on the work bench. "You are a bad, bad boy. Stop it. This is for your own good." Doctor reordered his thoughts and continued the debriefing within the dataspace. {A bond was altered within the genetic structure, the effects of which cascaded through the nanite manufacturing process. What was produced were imperfect nanoprobe, open to exposure to a potential mech infection. The already present mech virus linked its matrix into the power pathways of the nanites, able to alter programming sufficiently for the few flawed nanites in the body to begin to replace sound DNA with the defective copy.}

Assimilation concurred, {Yes, this hierarchy must agree, as we provided much of the data to corroborate the speculation. At that point, the virus packaged its matrix into the defective nanites, which then were spread through contact. Specifically, scratching to open a tear in skin or body armor. In essence, the virus has been using our own systems to reassimilate those it infects in order to make further copies of itself. The depressing side-effect of its actions is, well, the behavior that the members of this sub-collective have been experiencing.}

Captain focused on 2 of 20, using Doctor's sight to examine the annoyed drone. {And him? Why is he not affected?}

Doctor eyed 2 of 20's face, then imaged a display of brain activity scans. The simulated false color picture had more akin to a thunderstorm as viewed from space than a normal humanoid pattern. {Do you think /anything/ can function properly in there?}

{Point taken.} Captain centered his personal point of view once more within himself and his nodal intersection. {Actions to be taken?}

{Terminate all the drones infected!} This came from Weapons, who up to this moment had been silent. He had not had a big role in formulation of the technical details of the problem. {Terminate them all!}

{I don't think tho!} roared Delta.

Captain groaned, {Over half of your hierarchy is infected. You would lose 307 tactical drones. Think of the consequences for once.}

{Oh.} Pause. {It might be more difficult to blow things up.}

{Very good. Any other suggestions for a course to be taken? Weapons, you will not respond.}

Silence, then, {The mech buggerth assimilated uth. I thay that we...we - no I must not dampen the containment fields about the main reactor core - we assimilate the virus right back.} Delta slurred her way through the thought.

Could it be done? The vast organic and silicon computer which was Cube #347 set itself upon a new task.

Delta B stood before Assimilation, weaving slightly back and forth. Delta could not get herself to balance properly; and she dared not let Body A assist to steady herself in fear she might completely lose herself to the drunken, inhibitionless state. Not and expect to keep the cube in one piece. Delta locked her gaze (Body A was in the same node - Assimilation Workshop #7 - even if she could not be physically next to herself) on Assimilation, duel view both clear and blurry. She bared Body B's neck to the other drone.

From the tool cart Assimilation picked up a hypospray. This was not the standard way to inoculate another Borg, but he had no wish to become "drunk." The universe was depressing enough already. Therefore, an archaic medical design from non-assimilated species had to be employed to insert modified nanoprobes into Delta B. Delta had been the logical choice as guinea pig as she could relate if she was getting better after the injection.

The hypospray hissed, delivering its minute packages of targeted destruction. While part of the sub-collective continued to fend off random commands in the dataspace pathways, the rest turned inward, watching the progress of a battle held on the scale of nanometer and electrical impulse.

Secondary (2') nanites keep in contact with each other through quantum-level communication, slower than subspace, but perfectly adequate for coordination of programming within a host body. Quarks and hydrogen atoms encoded huge quantities of information, collective instinct spread amongst millions of tiny machines. The primary task was similar to normal: find target cells and inject them the DNA chromosome appropriate for the metahost. The main alteration in programming was the nanite was additionally to cross the lipid barrier of cell membrane and nucleus, then physically destroy the artificial chromosome already present; i.e. wipe the slate clean and reassimilate.

Also in the mass of machines were 5' nanoprobes. This particular nanite variant could be employed in the assimilation of computerized hardware, but its normal duty was maintenance of

the host body, inclusive tearing apart biological viruses and scavenging broken nanomachines. In this case the 5' nanoprobe was specifically programmed to find and eliminate defective nanites. There were many targets.

The nanite inoculation spread through the arteries and veins of Delta B, reporting success (and resistance) to each other and to the host. The battle was joined.

Delta B felt, and watched, herself collapse. There was resistance from the mech virus; in self-defense it had activated pain receptors in Body B, liberally flooding the senses with chaotic chemo-electric impulses in order to hide its matrix. Delta hurt; she had not felt pain in such a relevant and personal manner a very long time. The sub-collective, those not incapacitated, offered to take and spread the agony among all component drones. The gesture helped somewhat.

"This. Is. Ridiculous.," said Delta A through her teeth. "Assimilation. Help. Me. Put. Myself. Into. An. Alcove." Delta stepped forwards to heft her limp body. It felt like needles were being driven into the arm she grabbed. Assimilation hung back. "Get. Up. Here. Now. Or. Else. I. Will. Make. You. Regret. It. When. I. Am. Better." Assimilation put down the hypospray and hesitantly took a position on the opposite side of Body B. Together Delta and Assimilation put Body B into an alcove, where umbilicals automatically attached. Delta felt much better.

The removal of the mech virus progressed. Painful resistance occurred every step of the way. Finally, unable to hide as its nanite hosts were destroyed, unable to survive in the electrical synapses of a drone that was not 2 of 20, the virus was purged.

Captain: {The process is successful. Ready doses for all affected drones.}

2 of 20 asked, "That's it? A tingle?"

A tingle. The 2347 drones who had been forcefully cleansed of the virus would argue that "a tingle" was not the appropriate description. Which they did. All of them.

"Is it eliminated?" asked Captain. He had transported to the maintenance bay. All seemed to be in order, although the large pile of equipment against one bulkhead appeared suspiciously out of place. Captain dismissed his misgivings: any non-sentient Doctor may have smuggled aboard recently would have escaped by now, to the annoyance of Delta and the engineering hierarchy.

Absorbed in examining the data from body system and brain scans, Doctor did not notice the glance at the wall. "This hierarchy thinks so."

"Think?"

"There is no surety beyond terminating 2 of 20."

"No, you don't want to do that."

Useless termination of drones like myself is not good for the greater advancement of the Collective," quickly interjected 2 of 20. He was still clamped on a work table.

Channeling the unfocused consensus of a significant minority of the sub-collective, Captain was tempted. Very tempted. But.... "He has undergone the decontamination procedure. After all uninfected drones are inoculated, and if scans continue to show the virus absent from his system, 2 of 20 will be allowed to return to his duties."

2 of 20 was quiet, just in case. He did not want to jinx the consensus, which had been very close to favoring termination.

Captain transported back to his alcove. Several minutes later, Doctor and two others of the maintenance hierarchy which had been in the workshop disappeared in a swirl of green

special effects. Their destination was a bay in a different subsection where several drones damaged in the detoxification required minor surgery.

2 of 20 stared at the ceiling, allowing his mind to slip into neutral. He was obviously not going anywhere for a while. There was no useful physical task to perform while locked on the table; and, in his current accelerated state of mind, it was difficult to fully immerse himself in the subconscious of the sub-collective when he was not in his alcove undergoing regeneration. Instead, the little voices in his brain demanded his attention. A new voice was present, one which neither decanted the wisdom of G'floo! nor espoused the joys of the lulog berry; 2 of 20 happily listened.